

A turn-up for the books: yes, it's ... Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

John Henderson

One thing about stories, they always need telling. There is always more to any telling than just the story that is told. Stories pose as coming to you one at a time. But they don't, you know. Ovid's big celebration of storytelling in his poem the *Metamorphoses* shows you this in an infinite number of ways. Here are some, enough, I hope, to start you off.

Well, that's my story, any way. (But what else is going on as I try to tell you about it? It's like this, actually. You see, *Once upon a time*, there was this . . .)

Any story about Ovid's poetry must *at once* attend to the 'metamorphoses' that its language goes through and inflicts on the twists and turns of its stories. What Fred Ahl has called '*Metaformations*' – including this sort of thing ('metaplasms'): *Omnibus, Ominibus, Nominibus, No Minibus, O Minibus* . . . – is just one aspect of Ovid's funhouse of writing, calling attention to the language it is written in. (A few choice bits of such *Ovidspeak* will force themselves upon us as we go. If you're still there, sitting comfortably . . .)

I'm going to stick to storytelling, the 'metamorphoses' of storytelling, if I can. I expect I'll 'turn' aside, too, as I am right now. (Or am I? What counts as 'digression' is going to depend on what story I'm telling, isn't it? Write now, for a start, it's my 'turn' to do a 'turn' for *Omnibus*, so here we go, let me tell you once '*For All*'? Now it's your turn: what's *your* story? Sure? Tell me more. Send me a postcard.)

Once . . . I've told you my story about storytelling, believe it or not, I'd like to talk a little about what the *Metamorphoses* turns out in the end to say to its and no doubt to our world. You'll find that I've been telling you about nothing else all along. If you get that far. What else can I say? (That'd be telling.)

I. Once upon a time ...

There's this story, old as the hills, you must have heard it: a quick one, as they say, while he's away: Mars and Venus Rambo meets Madonna, you get the picture – *once* had a scene. In no time, in no time at all, this news of the world was brought to Vulcan, he was her man and she was doing him wrong, by the tell-all *Sun*. Vulcan wove a superfine net, caught them at it and called in *Neighbours* for a look and a laugh. It's a funny old world and no mistakin'.

'Everybody knows this story', Ovid tells us: it was in Homer and now it turns up (like a bad Penny) in Ovid. (Book 4 of his *Met.* and before that in his *Art of Love* and before that in his *Erotic Poems*. (Each time he called it the best-known tale 'in heaven'/'in the universe'. (Get it?) It's getting famouser and famouser, every time Ovid tells it. It's a 'dirty bit' of the *Odyssey*, the bit everyone knows, so it's getting more and more 'notorious'. It's the bit that Ovid and Ovid-fans thumb, the bit of Homer that is just meant for Ovid to showcase. (Actually, it's a sick bit of Homer, if you ask me, because its telling helps cheer everybody in that story up (– in fact that's what it's 'for' in the story –) including the hero Odysseus: but he ought really to be wondering if his wife has found a macho mouse to play with while the cat's been away (– for twenty-odd years –). (But I digress (, do I?) (Do you like 'nested' paragraphs, like this one? (They're like the *Metamorphoses*, they make it hard to remember what story they started off telling. (They also leave the problem of a pile-up of brackets at the end (, like this:))))))

Now Ovid doesn't tell you this story.

For a start, a girl from Thebes sings it to you. One of three batty sisters. (Good girls who do wrong by doing just what they're supposed to do. There's a riddle for you – But maybe I'm losing the thread?)

And as well, it's actually *told* in the poem as *prelude* to 'the story', which is going to be about the way Venus got her own back on the Sun. The story from Homer is just the occasion for the spicy story that Ovid's poem is going to make famous. And '*vice versa*'. (Turn your mind to that Latin phrase about 'metamorphosis', about things 'turning' into other things!)

Nothing common-or-garden about this story? (We shall see how it turns out . . .)

Once upon a time, Mr. Sun fell for someone or other's daughter, posed as her mum to clear the room and forced himself on her. *Once* he knew, her dad, as you can imagine, *at once* buried her alive. This simply made the Sun's day (can you imagine?) and all he could do was magi-grow her into an incense-shrub. And that, O best beloved, is where frankincense comes from: sun-ripened, done to a turn. (I guess he grew the seed he'd planted? Ughh! What Ovid the poet does here is tell how a 'maiden', *uirgo*, was turned into a 'plant', *uirga*. But be that as it may.)

One dead female, then. But that's not really the story yet, quite : P.T.O.

The telltale who told Dad on the Sun was herself just one of the many rejects that The Sun turned his nose up at. This sun-worshipper promptly went bananas, and after terminal anorexia became the heliotrope plant. (This is the flower that turns to face the sun as it goes across the sky every day. Always 'turning', every day: continual 'metamorphosis'. The story

all turns upon a name. In Greek 'heliotrope' means 'sun + turn', two ideas in one compound word. Latin has to 'turn' it into two words or else turn Greek itself for a moment. More later on this.)

So here's a world emptying of young women, good or bad, and filling up with flora. Welcome to the 'fun' world of storytelling. Pass it on and no returns!

This double-edged tale has enough passion and terror to turn the tables on Homer's jolly fun, I think. Enough, in fact, to make Homer turn over in his dustjacket. But I haven't told you *half* the story yet. (Sorry!) You see the story is *actually* the story of three sisters who take turns singing each other a yarn. And I've burst in on Sis No. 2. So let's back-track to No. 1. First things first.

Once upon a time, the story goes, Sister No. 1 decided *not* to sing various stories. She looked around for one that wasn't 'common'. (You'll be relieved to know. So it's going to be a novelty that Ovid will make famous. Brought to you, you wouldn't be surprised to learn, hopes Ovid, all the way from Babylon. (Or from 'Babyland', i.e. from the back of his head? Could be!) And/or it's a story which – though I'm afraid it *does* feature a garden-is anything but 'common'. In fact, it's going to be a weepie. But I'm getting ahead of myself. In fact, I'm almost telling you about Shakespeare already. He can wait for a Midsummer Night.)

Once upon a time, Boy didn't meet Girl. They lived next door, but there was this whacking great wall in the way. (Sun-dried mud-bricks, I expect, but a (Babylonian) Wall's a wall for all that). It did show them its chink, though, and they agreed to rendezvous at 24.00 hrs. down by the graveyard, under the shade of the ole mulberry-tree. A passing lioness – you heard: an after-dinner lioness, O.K.? turned on Her, chewed up the nightie she shed as she turned tail and, with a surprising turn of speed, beat it to a cave and left the bits all bloodied for Him to find when he turned up. He did the decent thing – kissed the scanties and stained the mulberries. In fact, he stained mulberries forever blood-red, with the spurt of his suicidal wound. I expect he painted the landscape with Turneresque reds, don't you? (Something for everyone to enjoy here? Yukkh! Does this turn your stomach? Ovid actually tells you it was just like an exploding radiator, but I'll spare you that.)

Anyone would think she was a *Roman* heroine: She followed suit, it was her turn, and then their parents put them both through the 'chink' of an urn's neck, so their ashes could be together for ever. (Isn't that sweet? Nothing 'common' here, told you. Ovid the poet gets the teen-romantics, his Jason 'n' Kylie mini-tragedy, 'together', *una*, within their 'urn', *urna*, to end (t)his tale, but that's *not* what I'm telling you about, is it? Turn again Henderson!)

Own up, this – the tale of '*Pyramus and Thisbe*' – has to be one of the best stories ever to come out of the Middle East. ('Best'? Yer wot? Whatever turns you on? I won't tell if you won't!) But we must run on to Sister No. 3 and the story of her telling her tale.

Once upon a time, she began by telling us five stories she was not going to sing. Because she had a 'new' one for our delectation. She claimed. But at the same time, it's about something that is 'as (in)famous as can be'. Even though nobody understands its why and wherefore . . . Yet.

There was *once* this young son of Mercury and Venus (Remember her? No, she wasn't married to Mercury.) He once took a bath in a pool. As usual, a nymph had been out picking flowers, as innocent as innocent can be, and had one of her turns, gone completely ga-ga over him. Well she would, wouldn't she? She'd tried some very polite approach-work, the usual thing ('Come here often?' & so on.). But he'd just blushed, turned colour, turned way, turned his back on her, turned her down and . . . told her to dry up. Once he stripped off, he turned her head, she just had to join him, so off came the see-through nymph's outfit and . . .

I expect you'd rather not know the rest? Well, hard luck. She grabbed him and her wish was granted. Their lives turned turtle, they grew into a one twosome, a neither-nor, both-and, sex-graft. What came out of this turning-point and out of the pool was not 'the nymph' and 'the son of Mercury 'n' Venus', but 'hermaphrodite'. A story that makes 'Go jump in a lake' a whole different ball-game. With this Lady of the Lake we plumb the bottomless depths of Sex, hers and her toyboy's. (Ovid the poet 'turns' Hermes and Aphrodite into Latin Mercury and Venus so he can 'turn' them back into the metamorphosed 'Hermaphrodite': the story shows us how the separateness of Latin's 'Mercury' and 'Venus' and the Greek compounding of 'Hermaphrodite' are 'metamorphoses' of each other. The Message of Love could be that the product is more than one and less than two?)

Now, perhaps you'll see, we have turned the corner and begun to tell of the telling of these tales.

Now, perhaps you'll agree, we have hardly begun to tell of the telling of these tales. You see, *once upon a time*, these three sisters sang these songs as a diversion, turn and turn about. It was a time-out in their story, a diversion, a digression from their story (?). These Theban women sang and span as if it was any old day for good girls. They were weaving 'for Minerva' on the holiday that everyone else was keeping as Holy Day for the 'new' Theban god Bacchus. Their profane 'work' was these stories, their busyness was this combination of song and spinning. Let's call them both 'Yarns'. (Each sister in turn 'begins' her song, for example, ushered in with the verb *ordior*, which means 'begin' (esp. speaking), but also

means 'weave'. (The 'original' sense: in the woman's textiles is the very image of all 'Order'). Let's say that these naughty sisters by turn 'get weaving'.

The Sisters' singing 'demo' is to provoke Bacchus' revenge. They're deliberately turning a deaf ear to Bacchus and after it's over things take a turn for the worse, their looms sprout leaves and turn into trees. The women become bats squeaking in a belfry. They're one turn in the story of Bacchus, patron spirit of high spirits, 100% proof spirits and spirituals. (i.e. wine, women 'n' song.) Bacchus is at work in this stretch of the poem as the logic-bending, shape-shifting inspiration of Ovid's poetry. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are written under Bacchus' influence, whatever the poet turns his hand to. (Under the influence . . . : he can, you'd better believe it, turn his hand to anything.) This is his patch and he makes sure that the stories turn on minds. It all turns on one turn-on or turn-off after another.

But – however diverting you find the stories round Bacchus – he's only an accessory in the tale of the house of Thebes. His victim was just No. 2 grandson of the Founding Father that we are *really* telling about. Two ruined princes help ruin Grandpa. As one complication among lots, the story of Bacchus has been the story of one grandad's daughters and the story of another one follows the Sisters' 'batting'. We're reading, throughout all this, the story of the Foundation of a City and the story of a Dynasty. After grandparents have turned snake, it's the turn of the third grandson. He is successful, for a change, through the support of Minerva. (Remember the Sisters' weaving was 'for' her.) On this hangs a tale.

Actually, the Singing Sisters were themselves part of a story of rivalry in singing/weaving. Minerva will leave the context of the tale of Grandson No. 3 for a contest with the Muses, her song against theirs. (Ovid the poet makes this a 'contest' (*certamen*) of 'song' (*carmen*). There's *actually* another word *carmen* in Latin. It means 'carded wool'. It provides the missing link between the stories.) This Song Contest spurs Minerva on toward her showdown Weaving Contest with the original Spiderwoman.

But *actually* the tale has all along been telling the saga of Thebes, as it ends by recalling, as the fulfilment of the prophecies of its blind trans-sexual seer. (And, in good time, those of the seer's daughter.) 'Thebes' has itself but a bit-part in the story of the Rise and Fall of Nations. It will, for a start, play anti-City of the Damned to the *Metamorphoses*' straightman 'Rome', Home of the Blessed . . .

By the time the storytelling's net has spread this wide, well on the way to encompassing the totality of Existence, in fact, we'll have found that a story such as the one 'about' Vulcan's netting of the erotic athletes lies very much in the telling. The 'context' is not just an external 'frame' to its story. Rather it utterly saturates the story. Each tale is a pattern that is a part of as well as apart from the larger patterns that run through and across it. Foreground and background, figure and blocking clash and merge in a surreal collage.

The poet compared Vulcan's net /chains/bonds to the slenderest of threads. Well, that is what the Sisters are doing in singing these very words; when compared with the spider's web, it is of course patterned in with the series of contests that lead toward the showdown of Minerva vs. Spiderwoman. The 'art' of Vulcan is the 'art' of the Sisters, their singing/weaving. His 'work' is theirs. (*opus* means especially the 'woman's work' of spinning.) The 'speed' of the Vulcan story – in the 'story' and its speed 'as' a story (20 lines for Homer's 100 . . .) is the speed of the Sisters' nimble fingers, pressing on with their untimely work.

Do you see that when the brace of lovers jump 'into one double-bed', this is a transformation of *Pyramus and Thisbe's* 'one night will destroy two teendreams' and in turn their resting in piece 'one and the same place, an urn' and it's a transformation, too, of the fantasy turned loose of the *Nymph and her Toyboy* and their eventual fusion' into one-ish bisexual, hyper-sexual body'? One and many – more and less – neither and nor, or both ... (Like all the stories, all the patterns of stories, all the poem(s) . . .)

'Details' soon turn out to be 'patterns': the Sun turned *Mars 'n' Venus* over to Vulcan, the Sun's jealous chuck-out told (falsely-ish) on her successful rival; noone to tell on or turn in *Thisbe* – except her nightie, which set *Pyramus* barking up the wrong mulberry. The Sisters tell on those who tell on others, but their telling is simultaneously telling on themselves, for they are betraying themselves to Bacchus, who will make them turn over a new leaf . . .

All this is to say that this way of seeing 'the story' changes 'the story'. The story is this story of storytelling, storytelling as 'metamorphosis'.

Laughter at *Venus' Work-rest-&-play (A Mars a day)* will turn into the laughing Bacchus' routing of the Sisters. Their song tells of The Sun telling and 'told on ' and it tells of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in the Midnight Hour. The Sisters tell of all that is out of joint, of the spoiled timetable of adultery laid bare, of lovers' deaths both before and after hanky-panky, of passion as overmastering identity. They tell of nothing more and less than themselves, daughters devoted to Minerva, the eternal virgin of virgins; but their telling is itself untimely, and meant to be.

Listen! What they sung as they spun is *really and truly* the squeaking of night-birds that shun the sun. You see, in Latin 'bats' are known as 'evenin'-all-lets' (*uespertiliones*). The whole dimension of 'time' and 'timing' in and through their stories and their telling is shot through with this thematic meaning. The poem splashes itself with the energy that this principle gives to *everything* it talks about. (And, as I said, it gets to talk about 'Everything'.)

Even the way our Sister No. 2 is so 'sure' of herself is surely an unwise 'certainty' – You'll find that she's not worried whether or not her turn begins with the tritest of stories, where the

other Sisters are not 'sure' – because it leads, along with all the other features of the stories they sing that aren't 'sure', certain', 'definite' etc., to the 'twilight' zone between sun and dark, the 'light//night' of Batsville . . .

Storytelling is (isn't it?) bound to revolve round just this complex of ideas. But Ovid's imagination has made this come alive. (His 'imaging' of stories – the way he sees the 'images' that making up stories makes him make up and images that make them up.)

In any of these tales, references to clothing and to anything spun/woven/cloth-like, are evidently wrapped up in a 'metamorphosis' of singing to song and of song to singing. (Text' means' the woven', but let's not go into this.) The colours of anything in the stories – e.g. here we go round the mulberry-blushes – , anything that 'hangs', or 'depends' or is in 'suspense' etc., all trees or other lumps or adjuncts of wood, all growing plants, flowering and grafted people, all these are set to re-turn as the Sisters' loom, soon to sprout Bacchic leaves. Everything 'in' the stories is spellbound as the lovers pinned on the bed, as the ashes embedded in the urn, as Hermaphrodite on the bed of Lake Sex. In the grip of Bacchus, the god who undoes and ties up. In turn, in the grip of the poet, the one who frees his figures – and then freezes them. They are all the figures of Ovid's imagination, the figurative power of his writing, 'metamorphosis'.

Now turn round three times. You now see that all this, the story of all the stories, has all along been Ovid 's story of Ovid: Ovid's turn of phrase.

II. They say the world is smaller now. Small world.

They say that Man is taller now. Tall Man.

(Laurie Anderson)

So, 'There is only turbulence. Thing's aren't cut and dried, everything's fluid, the whole lot *drifts*.' Sings the poet, loud and clear. Says the poet Ovid, with this gi-normous poem of poems, his *Metamorphoses*.

Now what are you going to make of it? You're supposed to realise that this is not the way it's *supposed* to be. Because you know that's just the kind of drivel artists burble – certain *kinds* of artist that is. It doesn't get roofs on the temples. It doesn't make the grainships run on time. (For example, the fact of the matter is, where does that sort of messy thinking fit into a National Curriculum?)

The 'official' world must want to say where Everything belongs. It puts things in their place. And people. It is there to draw up rules, hard and fast. Romans, for instance, made laws, endlessly, sub-section and rider, category and clause. The Roman Empire carved up the world into provinces, all lined-up on the map. Their world was *their* world. Society was

indeed mostly *about* duly apportioning property, regulating propriety and respecting proper names. Putting things in order. 'Here, not There. Mine, before Yours. This way, above That' . . .

Any post-revolutionary state, the Rome of its first Emperor for one, is specially likely to go for as 'settled', as static, a cultural scene as it can. To make things *feel* sorted. That means that the job for intellectuals and artists *should* be to conserve, to collect, to compile, to fix definitive versions of all there is or ever has been, that sort of thing. The most important task of all was to set history 'straight'. To make sure that everything led right to the Empire. It always *had*, all along, if only people could have seen it. So the present moment was special because it had a privileged view over all the past. How lucky to live when people could see clear and true!

The mind that bossed the World State in the present was just like the Master of the Universe's. There was Augustus and there was Jupiter. What a team! Both of them free of the limitations that bind the rest of us ants and worms. Time, space, ignorance and blindness. All that. The various minds that helped put together the idea of Augustus's Imperial Majesty shared a slice of this Greatness: Omnipotence, Omniscience – Omni-this and Omni-that.

The architects/designers of the new Imperial Forum's line-up of 'All the Great Romans, brought to you in stone' were just as involved as Livy the Historian of Rome 'From Day 1' was. Virgil's *Aeneid* and the *Mausoleum* built for the earthly remains of Augustus' family were all about modelling a conception of 'All that matters'. Less sublime, but just as important in making it all come together. Agrippa's *map* captured the earth in an eyeview, the Augustan *street-plan* did the same for the city of Rome at eye-level, and even the rats knew they were living in the imperial capital as they scurried around in Agrippa's network of *sewers*. The point was to push the controlling system to a completeness that would make the Imperial palace into an Olympus, as beyond challenge as the weather.

The idea that an All-Seeing Eye patrolled the totality of existence was meant to get round Roman culture. The citizen was to learn that Everything was already taken care of. Just the occasional hiccup. Local problems, from time to time, just because some people hadn't yet twigged their role in the Order of Eternal Rome. Nothing to get steamed up about. Everyone could imagine themselves an All-Seeing 'I'.

All power depends on whether it can seize the power to mean. An imperial order can only get off the ground so long as it can say what it means. This means it must say what language means. Otherwise the meaning of power is at risk. In the ancient world poets – yes, POETS, had enormous prestige as vehicles of Wisdom. By the time that Ovid wrote his

Metamorphoses, it would have been a hard task to cancel his status as Top Poet alive in the World-Empire. He had long since become a master of meaning, a Word-Emperor.

His epic *Metamorphoses* acts out one more version of Imperial Omnipotence, to join the rest, the ones I mentioned and more. But *this* one uses the Poet's power to turn the tables on the 'official' world of the Emperor Augustus. Ovid creates his own Universe.

Ovid writes a 'total' account of EVERYTHING. From Day 1 of the Cosmos. Down to the foundation of the Imperial régime, or rather, in fact, down to the moment, the moment that matters, when . . . Ovid was writing his poem. His *complete* view sets him up as another All-Seeing 'I' who, like a Caesar, will never die. But Ovid's mind doesn't owe its perspective to the Imperial Order.

Instead Ovid invents his own point of view. And he does this, as we've seen, by turning Everything into an occasion for his ingenuity. His stories are the chance for Ovid to tell stories. His Way.

The way they overlap, merge and intertwine is the exciting game Ovid plays. He's not just master of his world, he's its boundlessly arbitrary inventor. The only 'Order' in Ovid's Empire is just the way stories come to him. The point of the entire history of the globe has been to give him the chance to knit it all together into one great collage of surreal blur. And he tells you this, for a start.

His poem starts with a silly little 4-line intro. And the biggest, biggest-headed, use of the power to mean you could possibly wish for. He tells the gods to 'spin his yarn fine from Creation on, all the way down to my *tempora*.' Down, that is, 'to reach Ovid's *times*'. Or, as he put it when he referred back later (for the benefit of his persecutor, the Emperor) to his writing of the *Metamorphoses*, 'to reach *your* times'. (Namely, the Age of Augustus.)

But Ovid is here telling you lovers of language to look within his turn of phrase, as you will in the whole of the poem, for the 'finespun subtlety' it promises: he tells divine inspiration to 'spin the yarn on and on to reach his *cranium*' (*tempora* in another sense, meaning 'temples' of the head, the things successful poets have 'garlanded', i.e. 'crowned', on their triumph. You can't get more 'finespun' than a fine pun).

So the Megalomaniac poet tells us triumphantly that Existence homes in on *his skull*. Without *telling* any such thing. Ovid just exploits the power to mean, the power of meaning. The poem's title and first verse already introduce the idea that every word is bound to be a transformation of another – perhaps every other – word. He shows that the Greek word *Metamorphoses* is itself a metamorphosis of its Latin translation *mutatas . . . formas*, a metamorphosis in which the two versions 'uncannily' stir each other's ingredients so that we

can't miss them in either manifestation. *Meta-* and *muta-ta-* must have been 'meant' to 'mean' each other! *Morph-ê* and *form-a* derange each other. What the Poet does *with* language here is cue it in so that readers can see that it's going to be his privileged theme.

Once you see the poem's work *upon* its language in these opening verses, you'll see what the whole shooting-match is 'about'. *Metamorphosis*. What happens when you write *verse-s* or *vers-ions*. (Both from *uerto*, to 'turn', transform, metamorphose.) What happens, then, when you write letters, re-write letters in a different order. (*Letters* 'make up' *tellers*: A *forma*, for example, is a linguistic 'form'. And do you know what *morphology* is? Let's just say that Ovid shows you that '*Metamorphosis*' is another name for Language, the poetry of language.)

What Ovid stands for is the Poet's own Order, his Empire of Language, his Omni-Capacious Mind. There '*For All*' to see. For whatever Ovid writes, it will always be our Ovid, still. When inspiration finally let him write a hexameter poem, after all the elegies that made him famous, it was the *Metamorphoses*. And there, at the Core of their Curriculum, you'll find Ovid, still the same old Ovid, Ovid the Stupid-Cupid elegist. The elegiac poetry of *AMOR* turns into epic *MetAMORphoses*. Still the people's choice, then, the poet that puts the 'world' in its place, our BeIOVID.

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